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## MISCELLANY

### FLORIDA'S FIRST BISHOP

Rt. Rev. Juan Juárez, O. F. M.

On page 171 of the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW for July, 1918, the Rev. Edwin Ryan, D.D., writes: "Florida is said to have been made (ecclesiastically) independent of Cuba and a bishop (Juan Suarez) appointed in 1527. I gave the statement" (in issue of July, 1916) "for what it was worth, but I have since come to suspect that it is worth nothing. It rests *altogether on a single piece of evidence*, and that from a source not altogether trustworthy, viz., the *Ensayo Cronologico para la Historia de la Florida* of Barcia, published under the anagram of Don Gabriel de Cardenas y Cano at Madrid in 1723. Here Father Suarez is called a bishop, but *no other writer* so entitles him, nor is his name to be found in any list of Spanish-American bishops."<sup>1</sup>

The late Dr. Gilmary Shea is even more emphatic. "Barcia," he says, "in his *Ensayo Cronologico*, speaks of Father Xuarez as Bishop, but neither Cabeza de Vaca nor Torquemada evidently knew anything of his election to the episcopate, and the portrait<sup>2</sup> is absolutely without anything indicative of his being a bishop. There is no trace of the erection of any See or Diocese of Rio de Palmas; his name occurs in no work giving the list of bishops in Spanish America, when even his nomination by the king would have entitled him to wear outward marks of the episcopal character. We must therefore regard this statement of Barcia as utterly unfounded."<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, in an article of the *American Catholic Quarterly Review*<sup>4</sup> Dr. Shea, reviewing *Alzog's Church History* as translated into English by Dr. Pabisch and Dr. Byrne, now Bishop of Nashville, makes this forcible declaration: "In the Spanish portion we find the *silly fable* of Friar Juan Xuarez having been Bishop of Florida given as a fact . . . That Xuarez was a bishop is *contradicted by every contemporaneous document*, by the silence of *all Spanish writers*, and by intrinsic facts. The reference made to a modern French writer, who compiled without accurate guides, was the *only authority* for the *fable*."

The italics are mine. It would seem that Fr. Juárez has a poor chance of retaining even the shadow of a mitre. However, let us see.

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<sup>1</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Shown in SHEA, *History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. i, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> SHEA, *Hist. Cath. Church*, Vol. i, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. iv, p. 138.

Good Dr. Shea could be very positive and emphatic; nevertheless, he could err just as well as other mortals. Students of his works have discovered that time and time again. At all events, when he asserted that every contemporaneous document contradicts the claim that Fr. Juárez was a bishop, and that all Spanish writers are silent about that subject, Dr. Shea committed an egregious blunder. He might have quoted at least one or two documents that contradict the claim. That would be evidence.

Let us first learn who Fr. Juárez was. Fr. Juan Juárez (also written Xuarez, Suarez, Suares) was one of the so-called *Twelve Apostles of Mexico*, the fourth on the list, that is to say, twelve Franciscans who came from Spain to Mexico in 1524, and affected such a general conversion of the natives that, for a long time after, the converts would date their affairs from "the year when the Faith came," *i. e.*, 1524. Fr. Juan was a native of Valencia, Spain, and became a member of the Franciscan province of San Gabriel. Soon after his arrival in New Spain, as Mexico was called in early history, Fr. Juárez was made guardian or superior of the convent of Huexotcingo. There he labored with much zeal and success for about two years, when he returned to Spain in order to enlist more missionaries, and to plead the cause of the Indians before the royal court. While thus occupied, he was chosen to accompany the expedition of Pámfilo de Narvaez, who in 1527, prepared to found a colony in Florida on a grand scale. Fr. Juárez received the appointment of *comisario* for the little band of friars who joined the expedition in order to labor for the conversion of the Indians. Cabeza de Vaca always mentions Fr. Juárez under the title of *comisario*. In order that the new settlement might possess a complete and independent organization from the beginning in ecclesiastical affairs as well as in secular matters, Fr. Juan Juárez was nominated Bishop of Florida and Rio de las Palmas (now Pánuco) in Mexico. Such is the affirmative side of the case, which, of course, must produce its proofs,

There is no evidence that Fr. Juárez ever received episcopal *consecration*, nor has any one claimed as much; but there is fairly abundant authority, besides Shea's "modern French writer," whoever he may be, to show that Fr. Juan Juárez was *nominated* Bishop of Florida and Rio de las Palmas by the Spanish king. That suffices, according to Dr. Shea himself, to honor with the title of bishop the first Franciscan who entered the territory of the United States. "Under the Bull of Julius II, the Catholic king could nominate bishops in the Indies. They were constantly spoken of as bishops."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> SHEA, in *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, Vol. iv, p. 139.

If there be no mention of Fr. Juárez in any list of Spanish-American Bishops, *quod est demonstrandum*, that would signify nothing, because Florida never was under the jurisdiction, either ecclesiastical or political, of New Spain, by which we mean Mexico. Nor was Florida under the jurisdiction of Cuba at the time of the Narvaez expedition. It was directly subject to Spain then and very long thereafter. At any rate, it would have to be shown that the episcopal lists always included mere bishops-elect. If so, and Fr. Juárez alone were omitted, then, *in the absence on any other proof*, the claim might be safely termed a silly fable, indeed.

In an earlier work,<sup>6</sup> Dr. Shea writes, "Fr. John Juarez went not only as Superior of the mission, but also, annalists assure us, as Bishop of Florida." He changed his mind later, which, of course, he had a right to do if he discovered evidence to the contrary; but if he found any such proof he has never divulged it.

Several historical writers in the nineteenth century thought the evidence strong enough to give Fr. Juárez the title of bishop. The translators of *Alzog's Church History*, already mentioned, admitted nomination of Fr. Juárez to the See of Florida, and for this Dr. Shea assails them somewhat savagely, as we have seen, but with little reason. Their affirmative was as good, at least, as his negative, until he had produced some evidence to support him.

R. H. Clarke, author of the *Lives of the Deceased Bishops in the United States*,<sup>7</sup> devotes *eleven pages* to the "Rt. Rev. Juan Juarez, O.S.F., First Bishop of Florida."

George Bancroft, author of the *History of the United States*,<sup>8</sup> appears to have accepted the fact, for he says: "Florida at once obtained a governor; it now constituted a part of a bishopric."

Very Rev. Fr. Pámfilo da Magliano, O.S.F., in his *St. Francis and the Franciscans*,<sup>9</sup> writes: "Annalists assure us that Fr. John Juarez was also Bishop of Florida."

The *Ensayo Cronologico*,<sup>10</sup> mentioned by Dr. Ryan as the only authority for the statement, declares: "Iba Fr. Juan Suarez por Obispo de aquel Distrito, desde el Rio de las Palmas hasta la Florida" ("Fr. Juan Suarez went as Bishop of that district, which extends from the Rio de las Palmas to Florida"). Dr. Shea quotes this work frequently.

<sup>6</sup> *Catholic Missions*, New York, 1854, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> New York, 1872.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. i, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> New York, 1867, p. 571.

<sup>10</sup> *Ad annum 1527*, p. 9.

If its author is regarded trustworthy on other subjects of history, it is not clear why he should not be called as witness in this case.

The picture to which Dr. Shea alludes<sup>11</sup> as having been taken from the original portrait in the convent of Tlaltelalco, where the portraits of the other eleven friars are to be found, can be only a fanciful copy, because photography had not as yet been discovered. Out of the *Twelve Apostles*, so called, four were named bishops, not counting Fr. Juárez. Hence, there would be some force in Dr. Shea's contention if the pictures of these four Franciscan friars exhibited any episcopal insignia whilst the portrait of Fr. Juárez alone lacked such evidence.

It so happened that in 1905, when I visited Mexico, there was in the gallery of the Museo Nacional at the capital of Mexico a large oil-painting. It represented Fr. Juan Juárez in Franciscan habit and cloak. To the right of the figure of this friar on a stand or table against the wall stood upright an episcopal mitre. The inscription beneath also contained some proof. It read as follows: "El Venerable P. Fr. Juan Suares, Hijo de esta Santa Provincia, Insigne en Pulpito y Cathedra. Renunció todos los oficios de la Orden y la Mitra de el Rio de las Palmas. Murió con fama de Santidad." ("The Venerable Father Juan Suares, Member of this holy Province, distinguished as preacher and professor. He declined all the offices of the Order and the mitre of Rio de la Palmas. He died in the odor of sanctity.")

The "provincia" mentioned in the inscription is the Franciscan Province of the Holy Gospel, which now comprises the eastern portion of Mexico. I had the painting photographed, and still possess two poorly executed prints thereof.

Lest there be doubt as to the identity of this Fr. Juan Suárez with the nominee to the Florida diocese, I examined the list of Franciscan bishops-elect in the *Menologio* of Vetancurt, and found that Fr. Juan Suárez is the fourth on the list. No date is given, but he precedes Fr. Francisco Ximenes, who was named first Bishop of Oaxaca on May 14, 1534. The entry reads: "El V. P. Fr. Juan Suares fue electo en Obispo de la Provincia del Rio de las Palmas, segun Antonio Herrera, lib. 4, decada 4, cap. 3."<sup>12</sup>

Again, in the *Menologio*, or Martyrology proper, for the date of March 21, Vetancurt says: "Fue electo Fr. Juan Suares en Obispo de la Provincia del Rio de las Palmas, segun Antonio Herrera dice." ("Fr. Juan Suares was elected Bishop of the Province of the Rio de las Palmas,

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<sup>11</sup> A full-page engraving is shown on page 109 of SHEA's *History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. i.

<sup>12</sup> *Menologio Franciscano*, by FR. AUGUSTIN DE VETANCURT, Mexico, 1697, p. 137.

according to the testimony of Antonio Herrera, in his book 4, decada 4, chapter 3.)<sup>13</sup>

Incidentally another witness turns up in Herrera. This work, however, I have not.

Turning to Latin historians, we have two excellent authorities in Fr. Francis Harold and Fr. Luke Wadding, both Irishman. The former, in his *Epitome Annalium Ordinis Minorum*,<sup>14</sup> writes as follows: "Alii quoque Franciscani ad Yucatanæ peninsulam missi sunt . . . His autem a Caesare serio commissum est, ut Dei suasque leges a provinciarum praelectis observari curarent, nec tyrannice cum Indianis agi permetterent . . . Sed idipsum quoque *Designato Episcopo Franciscano*, et quatuor Fratibus commendatum est, *qui cum Pamphilo de Narvaez, Provinciae Floridae et Palmarum Fluvii Praefecto transfretarunt.*" "Other Franciscans were also sent to the peninsula of Yucatan . . . These religious were earnestly charged by the emperor to see that the provincial governors observed God's Laws and his own, and not to permit Indians to be treated tyrannically . . . The same was imposed upon the *Franciscan Bishop-elect*, and the four Friars, who were making the voyage with Pamphilo de Narvaez, Governor of Florida and the Rio de las Palmas."

In paragraph 5, ad annum 1527, Fr. Harold emphasizes the previous statement by naming the bishop-elect. "Ex eadem Observatium familia selecti sunt aliquot: pro Episcopatu in urbe Mexicana erigendo, Fr. Joannes a Zumárraga; pro Darieni Episcopatu missus est Fr. Martin de Béjar; *ad Floridae provinciae sedem Fr. Joannes Suárez*, quibus etiam graviter commendatum est, etc." ("Of the Family of the Observant Franciscans some were chosen: for the Diocese to be erected in the City of Mexico, Fr. Juan de Zumárraga; for the Darian Diocese was sent Fr. Martin de Béjar; and for the See of the Province of Florida, Fr. Juan Suárez was appointed, who were likewise strictly charged, etc.")

Here we have the most important circumstance pointed out that Fr. Juan Juárez received the nomination as bishop at the same time with two other bishops-elect whose names and titles are specified exactly.

Finally the great Franciscan Annalist Fr. Luke Wadding in his *Annales Ordinis Minorum*,<sup>15</sup> relates: "Hoc anno 1527, . . . Carolus Imperator rogatus a provinciarum paraelectis, et Suis Conciliariis persuasus, nominavit pro Episcopatu erigendo in Urbe Mexicana, Fr. Joannem de Zumárraga; pro Episcopatu Sanctae Mariae Darieni, Fr.

<sup>13</sup>*Menologio Franciscano*, pp. 32, 155.

<sup>14</sup>Rome, 1662, tom. ii, *ad annum* 1527, No. 4.

<sup>15</sup>Rome, 1654, Tom. xvi, p. 247, parag. xvi.

Martinum de Béjar; *pro Episcopatu vastissimæ provinciæ Floridæ*, Fr. Joannem Suárez: quos statim hoc anno, vel sub initium sequentis, ad commissas sibi provincias amandavit, ut malis discordiis, quae vigeant inter provinciarum praefectos, et gravissimis Indorum pressuris mederentur." ("This year, 1527, Emperor Charles, petitioned by the governors of the provinces, and persuaded by his councillors, named for the Diocese to be erected in the City of Mexico, Fr. Juan de Zumárraga; for the Darian Diocese of St. Mary, Fr. Martin de Béjar; for the *Diocese of the vast Province of Florida*, Fr. Juan Suárez. The emperor ordered these bishops-elect to proceed at once, this year or at the beginning of the following year, to the charges committed to them, in order to remedy the evils and discords prevailing among the governors of the provinces, and to remove the exceedingly heavy burdens from the Indians.")

Historians thus far had overlooked a most important factor in the transaction—the name of the ruler who nominated the three dignitaries. Fr. Wadding happily supplies it. No less a personage than Emperor Charles V. made the nominations.

Those were not the days of steamships and railroads, of the telegraph and telephone. Between the appointment of a bishop by the king and the arrival of the Bulls from the Pope authorizing the consecration years often passed by, so that sometimes the bishop-elect departed from life before the consecration could take place. This was the case with Fr. Juan Juárez, who had been ordered to Florida and to exercise episcopal jurisdiction without awaiting the Pope's Bulls. Fr. Zumárraga, on the other hand, had to wait for his consecration until Sunday, April 27, 1533, *six years* after his nomination to the See of Mexico. Yet during all that period he exercised his episcopal authority.

Bishop-elect Fr. Juan Juárez was accompanied by the lay-brother Juan de Palos, also one of the "Twelve Apostles," three Franciscan priests, and several secular priests. The expedition consisted of more than four hundred persons; for Narvaez dreamed of conquering another empire of Mexico, and of surpassing even Hernando Cortés. So the intrinsic facts, Dr. Shea to the contrary notwithstanding, really called for a person clothed with episcopal authority in the great colony to be established independently of either Mexico or Cuba. The fleet sailed from San Lucar, Spain, on June 17, 1527. After a stormy voyage and long delays, the ships reached the coast of Florida on Holy Thursday, April 14, 1528. When a landing could be made, Narvaez and his following were exceedingly disappointed to find that the great cities they had expected to subdue proved to be mere Indian villages of the flimsiest construction. Then began the long and disastrous march

through the peninsula. The force, decimated by disease and constant engagements with hostile savages, finally emerged on the Gulf of Mexico. Slowly Narvaez and his disheartened company made their way along the northern shore. To the bright visions of conquest of another Mexico with rich treasures succeeded only the thought of escape; but only four survived the dreadful hardships, and after years, at last, turned up in the far West at Culiacán, Sinaloa. All others, Narvaez and Bishop Juárez included, perished from hunger, or by drowning, or at the hands of infuriated savages, about the end of the year 1528.

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